



Corporal Punishment: Current Rates from a National Survey

David Finkelhor¹ · Heather Turner¹ · Brittany Kaye Wormuth² · Jennifer Vanderminden² · Sherry Hamby³

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Abstract

Objectives To assess the prevalence of corporal punishment usage in the US population.

Methods This study was based on a 2014 cross-sectional, telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of US households with children. Reports about spanking of 0–9 year olds were obtained from parents, while reports about 10–17 year olds were obtained from the youth themselves.

Results The survey suggested that a majority of children in the US were not subject to corporal punishment in 2014. The rate was 49% in the past year for children ages 0–9, 23% for youth 10–17 and 37% overall. Rates of spanking were lower for girls compared to boys, Northeasterners compared to Southerners, and whites compared to blacks. They were also lower among those with a graduate education, and families with fewer than 3 children. The proportion of children subject to corporal punishment had declined by 2014 compared to other national surveys conducted in 1975 and 1985. This is in line with other studies showing declines of 26–40% in the spanking of kindergarden age children from 1988 to 2011.

Conclusion The trends suggest a continuing reduction of spanking in the population. Because of growing research and advocacy about this practice both nationally and internationally, it may be that awareness is having some impact and it will continue to decline.

Keywords Spanking · Parenting · Hitting · Physical abuse · Smacking · Beating

A scientific consensus has been developing that ordinary corporal punishment—in colloquial terms, spanking—has negative side effects as a disciplinary practice. Several comprehensive meta-analyses have found spanking to be associated with poorer developmental outcomes including higher levels of subsequent aggression, lower moral internalization, weaker parent child bonds, more mental health problems and delinquency (Gershoff 2002; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016; Gershoff et al. 2017). These findings have led the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to issue a new policy statement in November 2018 calling for pediatricians to counsel parents and other caregivers to “not use corporal punishment... either in anger, or as a punishment for” misbehavior (American Academy of Child and

Adolescent Psychiatry and Child Maltreatment and Violence Committee 2012). This was a strengthening of previous AAP guidance saying that “parents should be encouraged and assisted in developing methods other than spanking” (Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health 1998). Other professional groups including psychiatrists (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Child Maltreatment and Violence Committee 2012), social workers (National Association of Social Workers 2012), and children’s advocacy groups have issued calls to discourage parental spanking (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 2012; The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) 2016). In fact, a growing international movement has lobbied for the laws prohibiting parental corporal punishment, which as of June 2018, had been enacted in 54 countries (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children 2018).

Has this mobilization been influential in the US? Surveys about the use of corporal punishment in the US have suggested in the past that it was practiced by a majority of parents, but that it had been slowly losing support (Zolotor et al. 2011). Evidence from international surveys also show

✉ David Finkelhor
David.finkelhor@unh.edu

¹ Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA

² University of North Carolina, Wilmington, NC, USA

³ Sewanee The University of the South, Sewanee, TN, USA

signs of a decline in the use of spanking (Clément and Chamberland 2014; Lansford et al. 2017). However, the last national survey of spanking usage in the US covering the full developmental period of childhood was in 1995 (Straus and Stewart 1999). Some repeated surveys have tracked *attitudes toward* the use of corporal punishment (Corso et al. 2013; Hoffmann et al. 2017; Ryan et al. 2016), and some national surveys have looked at spanking practices in restricted age ranges (Gershoff et al. 2012; Klevens et al. 2019; Ryan et al. 2016), but no surveys in the US have regularly monitored its use across developmental stages. The present study provides a contemporary update on the issue.

Methods

Participants

The National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence (NatSCEV) 2014 was designed to obtain up-to-date incidence and prevalence estimates about a wide range of childhood exposures to violence. It consisted of a national sample of 4000 children and youth ages one month to 17 years of age in 2013–2014. Study interviews were conducted over the phone by the employees of an experienced survey research firm. Telephone interviewing is a cost-effective methodology (McAuliffe et al. 1998; Weeks et al. 1983) that has been demonstrated to be comparable to in-person interviews in data quality, even for reports of victimization, psychopathology, and other sensitive topics (Acierno et al. 2003; Bajos et al. 1992; Bermack 1989; Czaja 1987; Marin and Marin 1989; Pruchno and Hayden 2000).

Procedure

Sample

A nationwide sample was obtained using four sources: (1) an address-based sample (ABS) of households from which cell and residential numbers could be dialed; (2) a pre-screened sample of households with children from recent national random-digit dialed (RDD) surveys; (3) a listed landline sample (known child in the household based on commercial lists); and (4) cell phone numbers drawn from a targeted RDD sample frame. This combination of sampling frames was an effort to increase nationwide coverage of households including those served only by cell phone while efficiently reaching households with children to obtain the desired number of completed interviews. Weights were developed to account for differential probability of selection within and across the sampling frames and to adjust for nonresponse.

Recruitment

ABS respondents received an advance letter for the study with a household information form to determine eligibility and willingness to participate in the study. In return, the household would receive a \$5 check and soon be called to conduct the telephone interview for an additional \$20. A short interview was conducted with an adult caregiver (usually a parent) to obtain family demographic information. One child was then randomly selected from all eligible children living in a household. If the selected child was 10–17 years old, the main telephone interview was conducted with the child. Otherwise, the interview was conducted with the caregiver “most familiar with the child’s daily routine and experiences.”

Respondents were promised complete confidentiality. The interviews, averaging 60 min in length, were conducted in either English or Spanish. Available participants without such language skills had to be excluded. Respondents who disclosed a situation of serious threat or ongoing victimization were re-contacted by a clinical member of the research team, trained in telephone crisis counseling, whose responsibility was to stay in contact with the respondent until the situation was appropriately addressed locally. All procedures were authorized by the Institutional Review Board of the University of New Hampshire.

Response rates

The response rates differed among the samples. Among the completed interviews, 1011 came from the ABS frame (651 from those who replied to the study mailing; response rate (RR) = 67%) and 360 from those with matched telephone numbers on file (RR = 22.9%). 520 completed interviews were from the pre-screened sample (RR = 30.6%), 2443 were from the listed landline sample (RR = 21.7%), and 26 were from the cell phone RDD sample (RR = 14.2%). A large fraction (31.5%) of the 1011 respondents from the ABS portion of the survey represented cell-phone only households, confirming our expectation that the ABS sampling design effectively captures this type of hard-to-reach household. Weights were developed to account for differential probability of selection within and across the sampling frames and to adjust for nonresponse. More about the methodology is available here (Finkelhor et al. 2015).

Measures

To get information on corporal punishment the following question was asked of parents of 0–9 year olds: “Sometimes kids listen to their parents pretty well and sometimes they do not. Thinking of the past year, about how often have you had to spank or slap your child to get him/her to behave?”

The comparable question for youth 10–17 was: “Sometimes kids listen to their parents pretty well and sometimes they do not. Thinking of the past year, about how often did a parent spank or slap you to get you to behave?” Respondents were given response 6 categories of frequency from “one or more times a day” to “never”. We will refer to affirmative responses to this question interchangeably as “corporal punishment” and “spanking”.

Data Analysis

The corporal punish variable was dichotomized between those endorsing “Never” indicating no use in the past year and those choosing one of the other categories, indicating some use. Spanking rates for various population subgroups were calculated using Analysis of Variance. A comparison was also made between the prevalence of past year spanking in the current study and 3 previous national surveys asking similar questions. The 1975 data are from the National Survey of Family Violence (Gelles and Straus 1987), in-person interviews with 1139 parents from a nationally representative sample of two parent households with children. The response rate in this survey was 65%. The 1985 data are from the National Family Violence Resurvey (Gelles and Straus 1987; Straus and Gelles 1986), telephone interviews with 1428 parents in a nationally representative sample of two parent households with children. The response rate in this study was 84%. The 1995 data are from a nationally representative Gallup Survey of 1000 parents of children, including single family households (Straus and Stewart 1999; The Gallup Organization 1995). The response rate was 52%. Because of the age restrictions in the earlier published studies, comparisons were made among all 4 studies for just the children ages 3–11 based on one previous analysis conducted by Zolotor et al. (2011) and for children from ages 2–4 and 5–8 based on another previous analysis conducted by Straus and Mathur (1996).

Results

From the caregiver reports on the 0–9 year olds, 49% (95 CI 51–47%) were spanked in the last year. From the self-reports of youth age 10–17, 23% (95 CI 25–21%) were also spanked. The combined rate of spanking for the whole 0–17 sample was 37%. Figure 1 shows the rates for each year of childhood. The graph illustrates that spanking escalated strongly at age 2, peaked at ages 3–4, continued to affect a majority of children until age 7 and then gradually declined with age. There appeared to be no discontinuity between 9 and 10 in this sample across the change from parent to youth respondents. Girls were less likely to be

spanked than boys (34% 95 CI 36–32 vs. 39% 95 CI 41–37% for boys), but the patterns were parallel across the age range (Fig. 2).

There were a number of demographic differences in spanking (Table 1). The biggest of them was regional. Among the 0–9 year olds, the Northeast and West had clearly the lower rates of spanking at 40% (CI 46–35%), while the South was distinctively the highest at 59% (CI 62–55%). There were some ethnic/racial disparities for 0–9 year olds. Whites (46% CI 53–45%) and Hispanics (48% CI 53–44%) were less likely to spank than Blacks (59% CI 65–54%) among 0–9 year olds. There was also a strong educational difference for children 0–9. Those caregivers with graduate education were less likely to be spankers than those with college, some college or just a high school education.

In terms of family structure, there was little difference between single-parent and two-parent families, but there was a marked difference by family size for 0–9 year olds. Families with a single child were clearly more likely to avoid spanking than families with more children. The patterns were similar for youth 10–17. The Northeast was clearly the lowest in spanking and the South the highest. Whites spanked less than Blacks. However, in contrast to the 0–9 year olds, there was no difference by parental

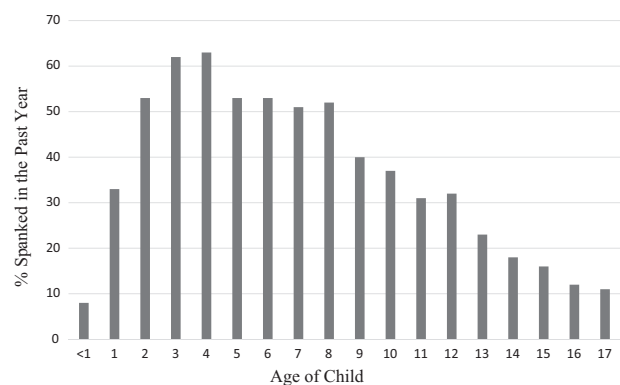


Fig. 1 Spanked in past year by age of child

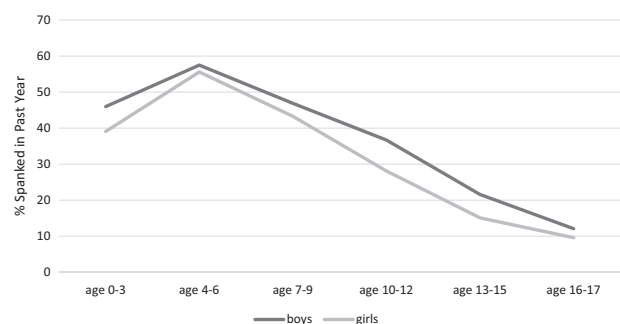


Fig. 2 Rates of spanking for boys and girls by age

Table 1 Rates of spanking by demographic groups

	0–9 Year olds		10–17 Year olds	
	%	95% CI	%	95% CI
Region				
Northeast	40	35–46	12	9–16
South	59	55–62	29	26–33
Midwest	49	45–54	25	22–29
West	40	35–44	21	16–25
ANOVA	17.707		13.465	
<i>p</i> -value	0.000		0.000	
Race/ethnicity				
White	46	43–49	19	17–22
Black	59	54–65	27	22–32
Hispanic	48	44–53	25	20–30
ANOVA	4.564		13.007	
<i>p</i> -value	0.001		0.000	
Education				
HS or less	49	45–53	20	16–24
Some college	60	56–63	25	22–28
College grad	46	41–51	20	16–25
Graduate degree	34	30–39	27	22–32
ANOVA	24.021		2.367	
<i>p</i> -value	0.000		0.069	
Family structure				
Two parent	50	47–52	26	23–29
Single parent	50	45–54	17	13–20
ANOVA	1.612		5.202	
<i>p</i> -value	0.185		0.001	
Number of children				
1	43	40–47	17	15–19
2	50	47–54	29	25–33
3	55	50–61	27	21–32
4+	56	47–65	37	28–46
ANOVA	6.266		15.060	
<i>p</i> -value	0.000		0.000	

education, but single parent and single child families spanked less.

To assess historical change in spanking practice, we compared findings from this national survey with data collected from three previous national surveys in 1975, 1985, and 1995 based on analyses in two previous publications (Straus and Mathur 1996; Zolotor et al. 2011). For comparability with the other surveys whose rates were calculated on parent reports for 3–11 year olds, we calculated our rate based on combined parent (3–9) and youth reports (10–11). Spanking in the past year for this age group dropped from 77% in 1975 and 1985 surveys to 65% in a 1995 survey to 49% in our survey from 2014, about a 28% decline over the 39 year period (Fig. 3). The decline was

particularly large since 1995 for the 5–8 year olds (down 23%) when compared to the 2–4 year olds (down 11%) or the 9–12 year olds (down 3%) (Fig. 4).

Discussion

The survey suggests that a majority of children in the US were not being spanked in the past year. The rate of spanking was 49% in the past year for children ages 0–9, 23% for youth 10–17 and 37% overall. The only group for whom spanking seemed to occur to more than half were the children ages 2–7. Unfortunately, we do not have data about lifetime exposures to spanking. Lifetime measures have more unreliability and are slower to show change with time than past-year measures. But because of the high past-year spanking rates especially among pre-school children even in this sample, it is likely that a majority US children still are having some exposure to spanking while growing up.

Nonetheless, comparisons with earlier national surveys suggest that the proportion of spanked children in the past year has continued to decline, in the range of 28% from 1975 to 2014. This comparison may actually understate some aspects of the change, for example, the abandonment of more severe corporal punishment, like the use of belts or other implements. Unfortunately, we had no measures of such practices in our survey. These findings are in line with other studies showing declines of 26–40% in the spanking of kindergarten age children from 1988 to 2011 (Ryan et al. 2016).

The decline in spanking may be in part related to the increased dissemination of information about its possible harms. This is one interpretation of the association between education and spanking for the 0–9 year olds, with the most highly educated parents, who may be more exposed to the social science and professional opinion on the subject (Holden et al. 2014), using spanking even less than other educational groups (Straus and Mathur 1996). Other factors that may play into the decline could be the reduction in family size (Pew Research Center 2015), increases in the age at which adults become parents, and a cultural shift toward more nurturance based parenting and away from discipline and obedience based approaches (Trifan et al. 2014). When families are smaller, parents may have more time to talk with children and find alternatives to corporal punishment (Sputa and Paulson 1995). Young parents are less confident, more stressed and have yet to acquire better skills for managing themselves and others (Trillingsgaard and Sommer 2018). Spanking is also associated with discipline-oriented and authority emphasizing parenting styles, which have waned in favor of positive parenting styles stressing reasoning, attachment and reciprocity promotion (Holden et al. 2017; Straus et al. 2014).

The decline in spanking is consistent with declines in other forms of violence against children and in society at large. Rates of agency substantiated physical abuse have declined (Finkelhor et al. 2018), as have school violence, bullying, and peer violence (Finkelhor 2014). This is suggestive of a normative shift that is increasingly averse to violence as a tolerated strategy for gaining compliance or sanctioning bad behavior, in interpersonal relationships as well as public policy, based on growing perceptions that it has too many negative side effects, and that other ways of shaping behavior and setting limits may be more effective or just as effective without the adverse consequences.

There are still fairly large regional and ethnic disparities in spanking usage. Very conspicuous is the continued adherence to spanking in the US South, where not only is spanking almost 20% more frequent for 0–9 year olds, but it is also the primary region where spanking still occurs in schools (Gershoff and Font 2016; Gershoff et al. 2015). Some of the Southern disproportion may be due to the region’s population of conservative Christians (Bader et al. 2007), among whom spanking is sometimes taught as a biblical imperative (Hoffmann et al. 2017) and ideological

conservatism, which is also associated with spanking (Ellison and Bradshaw 2009). Spanking is also somewhat more common among African-Americans (Gershoff et al. 2012), a pattern that has been attributed to intergenerational residues of the slave experience and a parental need to exert abrupt control in the face of the perceived dangers of neighborhood crime and race-based violence (Patton 2017).

These regional and ethnic differences do suggest that strategies to discourage spanking may need spokespeople and educational materials that are clearly identified with the cultural identity of the targeted parents. It may be particularly important at this historical moment, when some accounts of US political polarization and radicalization see a dynamic whereby less educated and more traditional subcultures (rural populations, religious conservatives) are feeling under siege, that the efforts to discourage spanking not simply be interpreted within the same lens and as part of the liberal vs conservative political and cultural clash.

Pediatricians can perhaps play an important role. Almost half of all parents in a survey in a southern state said that pediatricians were their primary source of advice about child discipline, more than double the rate of those choosing religious leaders (Taylor et al. 2017). Moreover, learning about the accumulating research findings does appear to change parental attitudes (Holden et al. 2014). The growing public policy interest in corporal punishment also highlights the need for more survey research about its adherents and about patterns of its adoption and abandonment. Some of the limitations of the present study point to challenges that confront such research. Contemporary surveys face declining response rates, due to changes in communication technology, and this can bias the detection of trends. Moreover, as norms shift around punishment, parents may become less candid about their practices, and this can create artificial patterns. Such factors could possibly have biased findings in the current study.

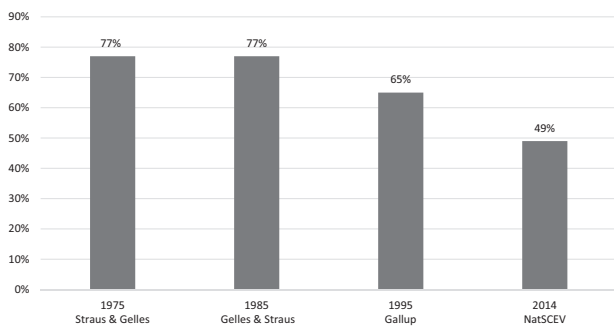
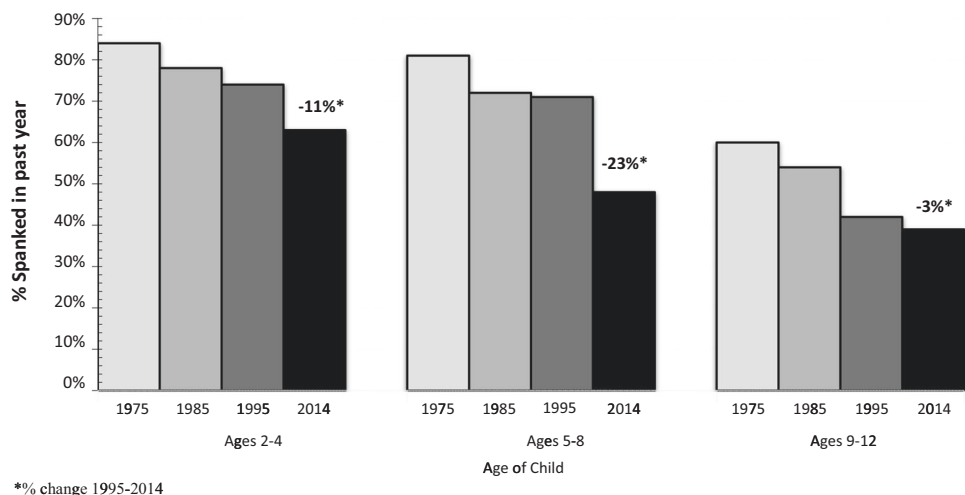


Fig. 3 Trend in past year spanking of 3–11 year olds from 4 national surveys

Fig. 4 Trends in past year spanking from 4 national surveys by age of child



%% change 1995-2014

Author Contributions D.F.: obtained funding, helped to design the study, develop the questionnaire, conceptualized the data analyses, and wrote the majority of the text paper. H.T.: collaborated with the funding, design, questionnaire, conceptualization of the data analysis and review of the text. B.K.W.: analyzed the data. J.V.: collaborated with conceptualization and completion the data analysis and writing of the study. S.H.: collaborated with the design, questionnaire, and conceptualization of the data analysis.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were conducted with the approval and under the supervision of the Institutional Review Board of the University of New Hampshire.

Informed Consent All participants were read consent statements and asked to confirm their approval. In the case of the interviews with the 10–17 year olds this involves consent from the parents and a separate assent from the youth.

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